



# Philadelphia Youth Network

Policy Brief #1, March 2007

## High School Reform

Historically, many mayors have had direct authority over the education system in their cities. Until recently, however, they have largely deferred to boards and superintendents to lead and monitor the work of schools. Now, with increased federal accountability, growing awareness of how education impacts economic growth and related issues like public safety and employment trends, mayors are taking an increased role in public education. These roles vary greatly across the country, from cities like New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Harrisburg and Boston where mayors have “taken over” the schools, to traditional “hands off” stances. Clearly, in the current climate of educational accountability, how a mayor approaches school reform, especially at the high school level, will be a critical component of his or her administration both in terms of immediate public perception and long-term economic impacts.

### The Two Most Important Things to Understand about Urban Secondary Education

#### Inequity in Achievement

The changing global economic situation demands higher levels of academic rigor for all students. However, these demands have uneven effects for America’s schools and students. Specifically, low income African American and Latino students, which make up the majority of Philadelphia public school students, have historically been underserved academically, and thus are being disproportionately affected by this increase in global labor market expectations.

Highest Achieving Low-Income Students  
Attend Postsecondary at Same Rate as  
Bottom Achieving High Income Students

Achievement Level (in quartiles)	Low-Income	High-Income
First (Low)	34%	77%
Second	50%	85%
Third	63%	90%
Fourth (High)	78%	97%

Source: NELS: 88, Second (1992) and Third Follow up (1994); in, USDOE, NCES, NCES Condition of Education 1997 p. 64

Considerable achievement gaps by race and ethnicity continue across the country. In fact, Pennsylvania has one of the largest gaps of any state in the union. For example, the Education Trust’s research shows that the average 13 year old Caucasian student reads and computes at the same level as the average 17 year old African American or Latino.

While many researchers and practitioners see education as a way out of poverty, the odds are stacked against low income

students. The poorer students are, the less likely they are to go on to college. For example, by age 26, 60% of students from high income families will have a 4 year degree, while only 7% of low income students will have attained that same level of education. This remains true regardless of their level of educational achievement. In fact, the highest-achieving low income students go on to college at the same rate as the lowest achieving high income students (see *graph, left*).

#### Inequities in Funding

In Philadelphia, the School District spends \$2,215 less per student than the average suburban school, with six districts spending over \$5,000 more per student than Philadelphia. If Philadelphia schools were to be funded at the same level as those six districts it would mean an additional \$572 million across the district each year. By the end of 12 years of schooling, the average student in the

high spending districts receives \$32,000 more in education spending than Philadelphia students --

A Tale of Two Schools

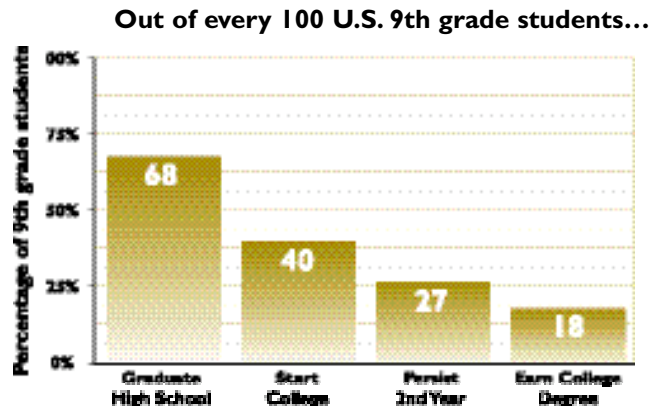
	Pepper	Abington
Asst. Principal	1	3
Dept. Chairs	0	7
Counselors	2	6
Psychologist	0	1
Secretaries/Clerks	3	14
Hall/Lunch Aides	8	15
Instructional Aides	0	11
Security Officer	2	0

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# Why do High Schools Have to Change Now?

## 1. A Leaking Pipeline

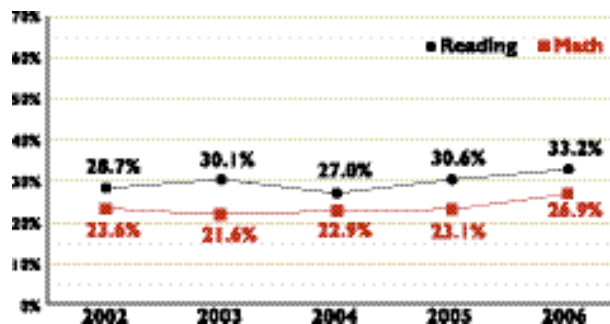
*There is a disconnect in academic expectations between high school preparation and the skills needed for college and career success. Awareness of this leaking workforce “pipeline” is evident among employers, post-secondary faculty and students themselves who believe that 30-40% of recent high school graduates are not ready for freshman work or entry level jobs. (Hart Research Group, 2005)*



## 2. Lagging Performance

*The academic performance of high school students lags behind that of elementary and middle schoolers. While elementary and even middle school academic performance has seen an increase, the national and local high school scores have remained comparably flat.*

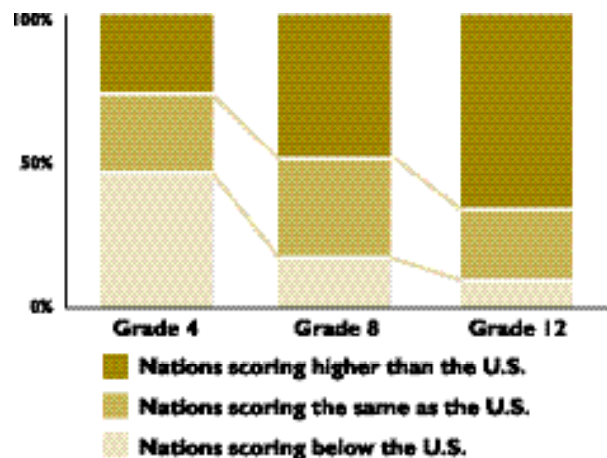
School District of Philadelphia  
2002-2006 PSSA Results  
Percentage of Students Advanced/Proficient  
Grade 11



## 3. International Competition

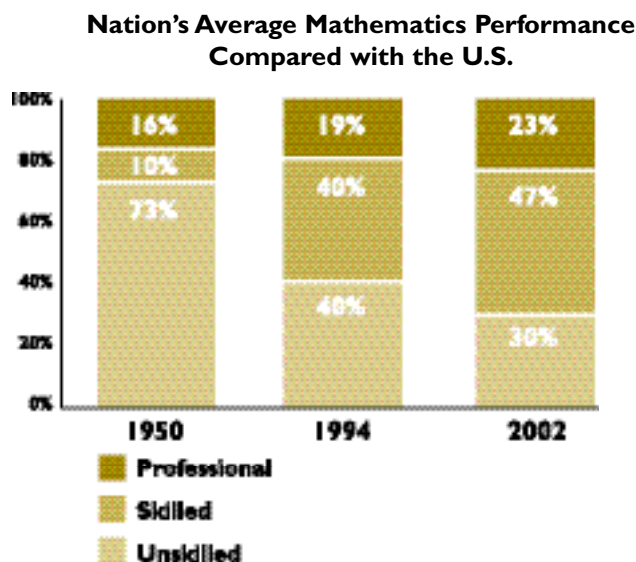
*U.S. students are performing at lower levels than their international counterparts. As is now commonly understood, U.S. students will be competing with highly skilled young adults from across the globe. But our high school students are in the bottom quartile on assessments of math, science and problem-solving when compared to students in other industrialized countries.*

Unskilled jobs in Pennsylvania are disappearing  
and demand for higher skills is rising



## 4.A New Economy

The new economy demands more highly skilled workers. The trend towards higher-skilled jobs is projected to continue. By 2010, as many as two-thirds of all new jobs will require at least some postsecondary education.



### Two Most Important Things continued from page 1

the equivalent of three years of schooling. (Public Interest Law Center figures) But what do these funding differences look like on the ground?

Those thousands of dollars per pupil, tens of thousands of dollars per class and hundreds of thousands of dollars per school can make it possible for students to have smaller class size, adequate art and music instruction, more student supports like counseling and tutoring, sports programs, better textbooks, functioning libraries, and much more. The chart (on page 1) is from Nancy McGinley's article, "A Tale of Two Schools" in which she very concretely chronicles the differences in resources she experienced in two schools in which she served as the principal. Both Pepper Middle School

(Philadelphia) and Abington Junior High School (Montgomery County) serve large, racially and ethnically diverse student populations of 1140 and 1700 students, respectively.

These discrepancies in staffing alone translate into very different educational settings for students. Adding to this the differences in textbook budgets, staff development programming, etc, it is difficult to ignore the argument that funding matters for urban districts.

A deep understanding of these two overarching issues: academic achievement gaps between racial and ethnic groups and lack of equitable funding, should inform all the Mayor's education policy decisions

## Elements of Effective High Schools

Research shows that effective high schools have a set of common characteristics:

1. Standards-based curriculum and assessment systems;
2. Higher proficiency levels for graduation that are benchmarked to industry and university expectations;
3. Work-based and college-based learning experiences in the junior and senior years;
4. Smaller learning environments in which every student is known and counseled about post-secondary plans by a caring adult;
5. Dynamic principal leaders and a greater percentage of highly-qualified teachers; and
6. Alternative educational pathways for struggling and re-engaged drop-outs.

For an in-depth look at the district's plans for growing more capacity in secondary education (which addresses many of the above elements), see their new white paper entitled, The Secondary Movement, Phase II: Redesigning Philadelphia's High Schools, available for download on PYN's website, [www.pyninc.org](http://www.pyninc.org).

## What Can Urban Mayors Do to Support High School Reform?

Here are some specific suggestions for the new mayor to keep high school reform moving in the right direction for Philadelphia's students.

### Do:

- Use the bully pulpit to get the message out that college readiness and career readiness require students have the same level of academic rigor in their high school classes
- Bring business to the table to increase internships and industry pipeline programs and advocate for equitable state funding
- Make sure city agencies are coordinating with the district to meet the non-academic needs of children
- Work with other urban and rural mayors to advocate as a group in Harrisburg for funding and reform
- Create incentives for high quality professionals (even from business) to teach in high school
- Pay special attention to drop-outs and support cross-agency prevention and re-engagement efforts
- Get colleges and universities to share student performance data with district

### Watch For:

- More work-based and dual enrollment (high school/college) experiences being developed
- Curriculum implemented with fidelity
- Accountability for serving re-entering drop outs
- Career and technical education (vocational education) reform
- Increased school choice but keep an eye on those "left behind" in neighborhood high schools
- More counseling and social support services
- Enough upper level courses offered at each high school

### Advocate for:

- Increased funding for alternative schooling models
- Revisions to state funding formula
- Education for legislators on the severity of the educational gaps Philadelphia faces

#### Additional sources

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The Philadelphia Youth Network's vision is that all our city's young people take their rightful places as full and contributing members of a world-class workforce for the region. We're pursuing this vision by making connections between individuals, organizations and systems to provide the preparation needed for our City's youth to thrive in a regional and global economy.

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